

Middlewestern Prairie Region  
(Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio)

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Prairie Falcon 2. Number: 1
  3. Location Iowa, Story County; T84N, R24W, Sec 30; ISU Beef Farm
  4. Date: 1 May 1978 5. Time Bird seen: 0940 to 0941
  6. Description of size, shape and color-pattern (describe in great detail all parts of the plumage, and beak and feet coloration, in addition, to the diagnostic characteristics, but include only what actually was seen in the field): A falcon, definitely a hawk with pointed wings, flapping and soaring along some hills. Flying somewhat close to the ground, within 30 meters. The bird was pale underneath with dark patches in the axillary regions. It was darkest on the side of the head, dark brown on the back. Seemed large for a falcon, larger than a kestrel. Perhaps 45 cms. long. Also had banding on the tail.
  7. Description of voice, if heard: Not Heard
  8. Description of behavior: Flapping and soaring along some hills within 30 meters of the ground.
  9. Habitat - general: wooded pasture, surrounded by grassy pasture, cropland, and woods  
specific: Open woodland pasture along Onion Creek
  10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:  
American Kestrel -- smaller and without dark axilla. They also have rusty backs, and do not have complete tail bands  
Peregrine Falcon -- has a darker face pattern and a slate-colored back.
  11. Distance (how measured)? 30 meters (closest) to 100 meters (farthest). Estimated. 12. Optical equipment: 7x35 binocs.
  13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): No cloud cover, so sun was bright. First saw the bird with sun at my back, flew over me and into the sun.
  14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: There are many American Kestrels in the area; have seen a Merlin before also.
  15. Other observers: None
  16. Did the others agree with your identification? -
  17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: None
  18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:  
Robbins Birds of North America  
Peterson Field Guide to Western Birds  
Used for confirmation
  19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? Immediately
- Patricia A. Heagy Address: Dept. of Animal Ecology, 124 Science, II Bldg; ISU  
Signature
- Date: 16 May 1978 City, State: Ames, Iowa 50011



Middlewestern Field Notes  
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If you watch birds solely for your own enjoyment, there really is no need to describe your observations in writing. But, if you have seen something unusual and want to share this experience with others, a written description is essential. It is true your immediate friends who know and respect your ability probably will accept your report without question, but what about those who do not know you, particularly the bird students 100 years from now who cannot know you? Also, what about the habitual skeptics? And most importantly, what about the compilers of regional bird lists who probably will insist that records be scientifically sound? All these critics will investigate your observation not because they assume you are wrong, but merely because they ordinarily expect verification. Whether the individual demanding verification realizes it or not, in doing so, he is employing a basic rule of the scientific method.

If your observation involves a common species during a season of abundance, verification is achieved simply by returning there again in season. If, however, the observation involves a rare species, or a common species out of season, verification is not obtained easily and special documentation is necessary. The best documentation is a collected specimen, and many bird students insist this is the only acceptable evidence. However, others recognize the importance and reliability of sight records accumulated by the experienced field observer, and maintain that even extraordinary sight records are acceptable if accompanied by an adequate verifying description.

It must be emphasized that a request for documentation is not an affront, but an effort to perpetuate a record by obtaining concrete evidence which may be permanently preserved for all to examine. This procedure is required for every extraordinary observation irrespective of the observer.

It should also be pointed out that with the great photographic equipment now available, species identification from photographs are possible. Such species documentation are highly desirable and should be sent to the state editors or to large museums.